



F-35 Lightning II Program

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WWII FLYING ACE ENCOUNTERS NEW GENERATION OF AIRCRAFT

The World War II flying ace looked wide-eyed at the instrument panel of an F-35 Lightning II simulator, as a pilot hovered the virtual fighter jet above a warship and safely landed it. "It's so much beyond my comprehension," Tom "Ginger" Neil, Britain's highest-scoring living ace, said of the aircraft's fifth generation design, which also has stealth features. "It's a new world entirely."

Seventy five years ago, a 20-year-old Neil flew a Hawker Hurricane for the Royal Air Force, shielding his homeland against thousands of German bombers in the Battle of Britain -- the first ever battle decisively fought in the air. "We didn't think strategically or anything like that," Neil said of his fellow pilots in the No. 249 RAF Squadron, who were as young as he was. "We were immersed with day-to-day fighting. All we were able to do is duck and weave to preserve our lives."

Neil survived tense dogfights in the four-month battle that left more than 40,000 people dead. He was later credited with shooting down 14 enemy aircraft in the war -- most of them during the battle that ended Oct. 31, 1940.

One day that remains vivid in his mind was Sept. 15, 1940, when Adolf Hitler ordered a fierce bombing campaign ahead of an expected invasion. As two major German bombing raids were launched on London, Neil and others were dispatched up to 20,000 feet in the sky to stop them. In the enemy formation, Neil said he focused on a Dornier Do 17 bomber and fired at it, causing the crew to abandon the damaged aircraft.

"I just saw whirling arms and legs coming at my direction from the back of the aircraft," Neil said of watching them parachute out. "I thought they were going to hit me."

German fighters also attacked him and he returned fire as best he could as he swooped toward the bombers again. "Everything happened so quickly. You were being attacked by enemy fighters at the same time and also shot at by other members of the bomber formation," Neil said, adding that his Hurricane only suffered minor damage.

Around 60-80 German aircraft were shot down that day, Neil said, four of which credited to him. "You shot at them when and how you could, and hopefully you'd hit something," he said.

Decades after his historic run with propeller-driven aircraft, the 95-year-old former wing commander toured an F-35 simulator that trains pilots on the Air Force's newest fifth-generation fighter jet at the Lockheed Martin office Oct. 7.

Neil, nicknamed Ginger from his auburn-colored hair as a young lad, was astute as he probed to know more of the aircraft, even if his hair has since faded to white. He recalled that in a Hurricane he could spot an enemy aircraft within a few miles. But an F-35 pilot could be aware of an enemy aircraft hundreds of miles away, officials said.

"It's unbelievable, mind boggling," Neil later said of the F-35. "It means a lot to me now that I'm a little more conversed on it." Although pilots engaged in dogfights may be absent in today's warfare, many believe air superiority of the United States and its allies is still being threatened as other nations boost defense spending.

"The gap is closing," said British Capt. Peter "Willy" Hatchett, assigned to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Program, who showed Neil the simulator. "We can't rest on our laurels." Hatchett, who has flown a Hurricane in airshows, said he was honored by the presence of a fighter ace of Neil's caliber.

"For me, being involved in the military and the projection of power in the modern age, to meet somebody like him, who put his life on the line and who really came through when the going was tough, is very special," he said. The first batch of F-35 jets is expected to be operational by summer 2016. At least 12 countries are slated to purchase the aircraft.



Michael Otterblad, director of international programs at Lockheed Martin, discusses the capabilities of the F-35 fighter jet with Tom "Ginger" Neil, a renowned flying ace, inside the corporation's office in Arlington, Va., on Oct. 7, 2015. (U.S. Air Force photo/Sean Kimmons)

The Air Force is set to be the largest F-35 operator, with more than 1,700 F-35A aircraft that'll work alongside the F-22 Raptor, the branch's other fifth-generation fighter.